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Joe Maslanka

MPP

May 13, 2020

WHEN I'M THIRTY-ONE

I pull my t-shirt from my jeans, stretching it to my face. I wipe away the sweat. The band just delivered one hell of a set. A rare afternoon gig at 'Muggsy's on the Boardwalk' in Ocean City, Maryland.

Beneath the Shamrock Hotel and Irish Pub on Fourth and the Boardwalk, Muggsy's beckons the young crowd with concrete steps descending to a basement housing two bars. Dive bar ambiance is accentuated by cheap lighting and neon beer signs. Exposed cinder block walls, cement floor, protruding floor joists overhead, and a wobbly wooden stage sprawled behind a cramped slab of dance floor make up all that is Muggsy's.

Bookings are a week long. Pay is \$800 for the week. Fringe benefits include continental breakfast and three rooms at the Shamrock. We pick up a bonus of seventy-five bucks to host a wet t-shirt contest. Big-haired chicks, with chests to match, vie to claim the title 'Busty Beach-Babe-Queen' of 1984.

We go by the Jitter-bops. Straight out of Norristown, Pennsylvania, just outside Philly. Three chords and a cloud of dust, blending rockabilly, punk, and blues. For change of pace, we'll downshift into an occasional honky-tonk like *Your Cheating Heart*, by Hank Williams, but the majority of the music is hyper-garage-rock.

"Squirt'em down, Happy Jack!" I scream to the local DJ. With his feathered hair, big teeth, Ray-Ban, and giddy demeanor, he runs to the contestants, spritz bottle in hand. Drenched

where it counts, the girls line up for the drunken applause meter. Flip-flop wearing, muscle shirted frat boys catcall and whistle for their favorite girl. I scramble from the stage.

Wading through the haze of blue-tinged cigarette smoke, weaving through the crowd, the sticky cement floor grabbing at my shoes, I make my way to the bar. This is a good time, but the trip's been a drag. Our sound guy has the crabs. He rooms with Mike Slick, the drummer. Mike isn't happy. Mike's been whining about the small amount of money we make, the shit we have to deal with, and the career he walked away from. He was a drug and alcohol counselor. His bitching started when he moved in with his girlfriend. At 28, he's seven years my senior.

To be honest, after four years of this, the road's been grinding me down. I lost my voice last month, right in the middle of a show. It left us settling for half- pay. It took a ton of lemon, hot tea, and no talking all day to barely sing the next night.

Living the dream, man. Just got to suck it up. But, with every setback, every piss and moan from the drummer, shit pay, and crappy accommodations, I feel an unraveling of hope. The rock star I dreamed of being is drowning before my eyes. I only find comfort in knowing that most of the big stars struggled along the way. I hang on to that like a life preserver.

"Hey, Joey Hepp, my main man, what's shakin', cat? You dudes are rocking it. Maybe I get up there, you know, like blow a little harp?" It's Mark Kennedy of Rocket 88, a blues band out of New Castle, Delaware. They've been around a long time.

I got to know Mark when we opened a show for them in '82. He is a rotund front man. At least two-and-half bills. A big stage presence. He sports greasy, stringy hair slicked back with Nu-Nile. By song two that hair hangs over his black, horn rimmed glasses. He shakes and moves his poundage, sweats profusely. It's a scene, but the man blows some monster blues hooks on his Hohner Special 20s.

“The K-Man, what the fuck you doin’ here?”

“Catching my favorite band, man.”

“You look lit, brother. How long you been pounding those Buds?”

“Not long enough, so the occasional Jack chaser speeds things up, ya dig?”

“Dug.”

“Hey, let me blow some harp with you guys.”

“Marky, I don’t know. I mean we got a tight schedule on this show. Hey, don’t you have a show to do tonight?” He pushes his hair from his eyes, removes his glasses, pats at his torso, sighs. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t find my smokes, need a cig.”

“Mark, they’re right next to your beer.”

“Ah, shit, hallelujah, you’re a life saver. Now let me blow some harp.”

“Shouldn’t you get some rest? You’re at the Turtle tonight, right?”

Fumbling to light his cigarette. “Fuck the Turtle, I’ll make it. Joey, wanna hear something?”

“Sure.”

“Old MK signed up for college. Gonna take some classes.”

“College? Shit, you don’t need college, how old are you, man?”

“Thirty-two. I met a fine lady. Man, I think I love her. I got to get serious, brother.”

“But you’re Marky K, you got a life, you blow harp like Little Walter.”

He drops his head. Smacks his meaty hand on the bar. “That and three bucks we’ll get you in a movie. I fuckin’ wasted my days in these bars, for nothin’. Need to get my shit together, Joey, I’m in love. Come on, let me blow some harp.”

“Rest up, maybe next set.” I run to the stage like I am dodging my fate. Avoiding Mark, we plow through a couple more sets. Some Italian girl from South Philly takes the prize. We play the Theme from Peter Gunn. She bounces her cleavage, accepting her \$25 prize, Muggsy T-Shirt and free pass to our show tonight. The bonus gig is over.

We make our way into a whole new world upstairs. The Shamrock houses an Irish Pub, just off the lobby. It’s a beach-geezer hang out. We stroll past the pub. I feel the gaze of over-tanned Mrs. Robinsons sipping Mai-Tais with their paunchy, balding male companions.

Ascending the mammoth old staircase, I step onto the creaking floorboards of the hotel. Shoving in the antique skeleton key, I open the door to my room to the stench of mold. All the times we’ve played here, it’s like I’m seeing the peeling paint, the yellowing sheets, the rusted radiator, for the first time.

I lie on my lumpy mattress, broken springs squealing with every move of my body. If the devil put you up for a night, it would look like this room. As I stare at the mildewed ceiling, I realize this has all been brought to light by my chat with Mark K. It was a real punch to the gut. There’s a tapping at the door, just before it creaks open.

“Richie Copacetic, sax man extraordinaire.”

Richie is the oldest guy in the band. I mean old. Thirty-seven. An accomplished jazz musician and instructor, he brought his tall, gangly frame, beard, and giant Afro, to a gig we were playing on South Street in Philly last year. He asked to sit in and it was a match. He dug our energy. We were blown away by his sheer talent.

The old sax man helped discipline us with timing and measure. Richie preaches dynamics like a musical sage. It took us two months to talk him out of his giant ‘fro and beard. Now he sports leather jacket and ducktail, so I like to think we gave the old man something back.

“Dig it, man, I got a great idea for the sets tonight.”

“Yeah, great, Richie.”

“Whoa, like you got a weird vibe going on, man.”

“Had a conversation with MK. It got me thinkin’.”

“Tell me, brother.”

“Shit, Rich, where the hell am I gonna be ten years from now? Fuck, I saw somethin’ in Marky I never noticed before. He’s tryin’ to go back to college and shit. Now. At freakin’ thirty-two? He was wasted. Fucked up. Holy shit, is that gonna be me?”

“Like thirty-two is young. Heck I’m only thirty-seven.”

“Only? But you went to school, you got a teaching gig and shit. Like you’re set, right?”

“I guess, but we’re talking about you. You’re riding out a dream, man. Like I wanted to play sax, teach sax, I rode it out, you’ll do the same.”

“I don’t know, Rich? What are the odds I’ll be the next Joe Strummer, the next Springsteen or George Thorogood? Mark is a hell of a performer, but he looked pathetic. Am I gonna be begging to sit in on some punk’s gig ten years from now?”

“Just let life come to you. Enjoy the ride, cat.”

“You know what, Rich, you’re like a human fortune cookie.”

Monday night is our last show at Muggsy’s until Labor Day week. I am greeted with a big toothy smile from Billy the bartender. He checks the part in the middle of his Irish red hair. He sets up two shots of kamakazi. We tap glasses and throw them back.

Billy dropped out of the University of Maryland, moved to Ocean City, scored the gig at Mugs. We have become good friends, partying after-hours with the regulars.

“What’s up with you, man?”

“Just thinkin’ bout the future and shit.”

“Future?”

I share my chat with Mark Kennedy and Ritchie. “You ever think about hitting your thirties?”

“Sure, sometimes. Hey, ya know what I really wanna do?”

“I’m stumped.”

“I wanna be a chef.” He steps back from the edge of the bar, waiting for me to bust his balls.

“Yeah, what’s wrong with that?”

“Get this, I actually talked to the Army about bein’ a cook. Just to get a start. Get some money saved to go to culinary school.”

“That sounds cool. I thought about the Army one time.”

“No shit? What came of it?”

“We had a string of bad gigs, so I popped into the recruiting office and grabbed some brochures.”

“Ya ever call ‘em?”

“Nah, we played a hot show that week, I met some girl, forgot all about it.”

“We should go in together.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure, man.”

“I don’t know. I got gigs lined up and shit.” After many more shots, a sparse crowd, more bitching from the drummer, and watching the sound guy scratch his crotch all night, I drunkenly

agree to join the Army with Billy. We don't know when, probably end of the summer, but we agree to stay in touch.

As the week closes in Ocean City, Mike the drummer quits. Our sound guy wants more money, so we fire him. We are going back home a splintered band looking to pull new pieces together. We have shows lined up, but we'll need to call in mercenary drummers and rented sound men.

With a wicked hangover, waking up from one of those shows to my cat meowing for his noon breakfast. There's \$30 on my nightstand. This was the take-home after paying the hired hands for last night's show. I am working out in my head how I'll meet the rent on this shitty one-room-apartment. Spike gets his Nine-Lives tuna flavor. I retrieve some jeans from the floor and pull on an Elvis t-shirt. Dash down the weather-beaten steps of the triplex. Jump in my El Camino. Drive.

In a haze, it's like my vehicle is self-navigating. I end up in Pottstown, PA, the town time forgot around 1960. Parking the El Camino, I spot the State Street Tavern. This is the place every kid, within a twenty-mile radius, had their first beer. The drinks are cheap and nobody asks any questions. I figure I'll head in, get lost with the Pottstown denizens and contemplate life. As I depart the El Camino, I notice the Armed Forces Recruiting Offices across the street.

The State Street Tavern is small and dark. I sit at the end of the little bar inhaling the stench of old cigarette and cigar smoke, long imbedded in every crevice of this rundown saloon. Sitting on a cracked vinyl and rusted chrome stool, sipping fifty-cent glasses of Yuengling Porter, I try to wrap my head around a life that, all of a sudden, has gone awry. My money is dwindling faster than my dreams. I can't get Mark Kennedy out of my head.

The darkness of the bar is interrupted by the afternoon light cascading in with the next patron. A real old guy, maybe late fifties or early sixties. He sits his age-toughened face one stool away from me. Placing a ten-dollar bill in front of him, he rests his arms atop the nicked and worn oak of the bar. A fading tattoo of a hula-girl dancing on his right forearm grabs my attention.

“Where’d you get that?”

He looks at his arm. “This?”

“Yeah, the tattoo.”

“Philippines, 1944. I was in the Navy.”

“No shit? Did you like it?”

“Fuck yeah. You thinkin’ of goin’ in, kid?”

“I don’t know, I think about it. I play in a band.”

“Oh, you gonna be the next Elvis?” He points at my shirt. “Hey, ain’t a lot of Elvis’s out there, kid. You best be fuckin’ good. You any good?”

“Even Elvis ain’t out there anymore. Good? Yeah, I guess?”

“You guess, fuck, you better know.”

“Why’d you go in the Navy?”

“World War II. Country needed me, ain’t got one regret, best time of my life. Got married, came home. I got a job down there at the plant. Gonna retire next year. I think I owe most of it to the Navy. Got my shit together, you know? You’re thinkin’ about it, ain’t you? I can see it in your eyes.”

“You can, huh?”

“Yeah. How do you want to live your life? Answer that question and things begin to fall into place. Don’t think you won’t be asking yourself that throughout your life, ‘cause you will. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Shit. You’re a kid. Anything you choose now, you got plenty of time to make up. Quit sweatin’ the small shit, ya know what I mean?”

“Fuck it, you’re right. Bartender, buy this man a drink, the rest is yours.”

“Thanks, kid. Where you goin?”

“Across the street.”

“I knew it. Hey, I did have one regret.”

“What’s that?”

“Don’t get one-a-these tattoos. Look at this thing, fucking faded out, looks like shit. Save your money, come out of there with something. Good luck, Elvis.”

I race across State Street to the recruiting office. Pulling the glass door open, I head to the Army Office located at the end of a long hall. My shoes tap the highly polished linoleum floors. I pass tiny offices to my right, Air Force, Marines, Navy, I grab the handle to the largest office. The Army is locked up. “Shit.” I start a slow walk back up the hall to the main entrance.

“Where you goin?” I turn to a short, impeccably dressed US Marine Staff Sergeant. A huge smile on his round face, he begins walking his highly polished black shoes toward me, extending his hand.

We shake. “I was here to talk to the Army about joining, but nobody’s in. Guess I’ll come back.”

“Thinking about joining up? You haven’t thought about the Marines? Why don’t you come on in? You should at least explore other options. I have to warn you, we only want the best.”

Grabbing me with that “best” line, I follow him into his small, meticulous office. I take a seat in a wooden chair next to his desk. By the time Staff Sergeant Barry Simone finishes speaking with me, I am just about hooked. I tell Staff Sergeant Simone all about my week in Ocean City, the conversation with Mark K. I explain that I have a pact with Billy the bartender. I tell him Billy wants to be a cook.

“We got cooks in the Marines. I can arrange that you and Billy go to boot camp together, no problem. You got his number? Let’s give him a call.”

I pull a scrap of paper from my wallet and dictate Billy’s number, while the Staff Sergeant dials. “It’s ringing,” he hands me the phone.

“Billy! It’s me, man, Joey. Guess where I’m sitting? US Marines, daddy! You ready to see our pact through?”

“Oh, hey man. Uh, like I told my old man about the plan. He agreed to front me the bucks for culinary school, just to keep me from going in. I’m moving back to Laurel in September.”

“We had a pact, man.”

“What can I tell you? Sorry, but I’m off to school. But, hey, good luck to you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“What’s the deal, Joe?”

“Well, Staff Sergeant, looks like no-go for Billy. I guess the pact didn’t mean shit.”

“Where does that leave you? Shame, you seem like a perfect fit for the Corps. Just because Billy’s a non-hacker, doesn’t mean you are.”

“Non-hacker?”

“Yeah, someone who just don’t measure up. That doesn’t seem like you, now, does it?”
He reaches into his desk drawer for a stack of forms. He lays them atop the desk. “What do you say?” He holds out a pen.